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SUBJECT: Radicals Test the Waters of Popular
Discontent

¶1. (U) Summary: The underwhelming public responses to recent Serbian Radical Party (SRS) demonstrations in Belgrade protesting the government's policies on Kosovo and The Hague has led some observers to suggest a growing weariness with nationalist hyperbole among a frustrated Serbian electorate. They also exposed some divisions within the party and with its nationalist allies. Despite increasingly assertive rhetoric from the Radicals to put pressure on the government to lessen its cooperation with the international community, the SRS is not in a position, nor does it desire, to push for elections at least until it can try to win nationalist points out of the end-game of Kosovo status talks. Nevertheless, the SRS is still easily the strongest party in Serbia, and recent polls continue to indicate a mathematical possibility of an SRS-SPS coalition in new elections. End Summary.

Yelling at the Wind: Weak Showings in Belgrade

¶2. (U) On February 24, the SRS organized a rally in the center of Belgrade against the government's Kosovo policies, efforts to arrest Mladic, and failure to improve low living standards. It invested significant resources and heavily publicized the event. Nonetheless, the demonstration failed to attract a large crowd, leaving Republic Square, the site of several 200,000 plus demonstrations over the past ten years, largely empty. Our sources confirm our own in-house estimates of 2,500 - 3,000 people at peak, with dropping temperatures making for an even smaller showing in the follow-on march through the city.

¶3. (U) In March, the Radicals made a play to steal the Socialist Party's thunder over the burial of SPS leader Milosevic. This grandstanding culminated in a prominent role at the March 19 funeral/commemoration, which some analysts believe it funded and organized, that harangued the US, key European countries, and The Hague. The event was also underwhelming, drawing only some 50,000 people (or less than two-thirds of one percent of the population), most of them pensioners, at peak - far less than the half-million the organizers proclaimed. The event also had little impact on life in Belgrade, despite extensive coverage on CNN and BBC, with the most common remark being a grumbling over the impact on traffic patterns.

14. (SBU) SRS General Secretary Aleksander Vucic told a key Embassy contact that the SRS plans to raise the tenor and ferocity of their attacks on the government this year, but will not attempt to bring down the government until fall. The SRS strategy is to act after the Montenegrin referendum, after Mladic is turned over to The Hague, and after Kosovo final status talks are largely resolved. In the meantime, SRS hopes that stronger rhetoric will slowly draw in more voters over the next six months. The Radicals hope that this plan would result in an SRS parliamentary majority, as Vucic remains concerned about the party's ability to enlist a coalition partner.

15. (SBU) The SRS stratagem also is partly designed to draw nationalist voters away from the SRS' competitors, namely the Socialists, erstwhile supporters of Karic's PSS, and the ruling Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). UN Political Officer Alex Mackenzie-Smith said that SRS acting-President Tomislav Nikolic recently told UN officers that the party is seeking to push Kostunica into a corner on Kosovo. In other words, the SRS would move beyond its current (and widely criticized) call for Kosovo to be declared an "occupied territory" if it becomes independent (reftel) and adopt a more "politically correct" position unacceptable to PM Kostunica, but that would still appeal broadly to DSS members.

The Radical House: Divided, but Stable (for now)

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16. (U) Complicating these efforts are internal divisions within the Radical Party itself. The fight for control of the party between Nikolic and Vucic, e.g., is longstanding. Mackenzie-Smith noted that SRS President and Hague indictee Vojislav Seselj has begun to favor Stevo Todorovic, the SRS caucus head in the State Union parliament, which represents another leadership challenge to Vucic and Nikolic. Nonetheless, party discipline remains solid so far, and SRS leaders have managed to effectively cooperate at least enough to present a coherent public front to their support base.

17. (SBU) In addition, local analysts tell us Novi Sad mayor Maja Gojkovic, the seemingly least objectionable of SRS's senior officials, has distanced herself from the party. She was notably absent from the February rally and March demonstration. She has reportedly told the party that she will continue to distance herself from the party as long as Seselj remains president and that she is reluctant to play along with the party's nationalist rhetoric. One respected analyst said Seselj ordered Nikolic to expel her from the party for disloyalty, but the SRS leadership has resisted because such a move would cause a serious public relations scandal and would undermine SRS support in Serbia's third largest city. Gojkovic's public position has been to deny any gulf between her and the SRS leadership.

18. (SBU) Finally, questions are starting to arise in Belgrade over Seselj's future in the party. Although he remains president and influential, Vucic has said that SRS leaders are often

frustrated by his interference and resent the overbearing role Seselj's wife plays in delivering orders to the party. Despite these rumors, though, it is unlikely SRS's leadership is willing to jettison their figurehead at this point.

Comment

19. (SBU) The Radicals are unlikely to push for early elections before the announcement of Kosovo's final status. The February rally and March 11 demonstration were designed to warn the government that it would pay a price "on the streets" for cooperation with the international community. Instead, they highlighted the limitations of SRS's ability to mobilize discontent or politically outmaneuver Kostunica, proving that it will take more than xenophobic slogans to win over a frustrated and increasingly apathetic electorate. Until Kosovo reaches its end-game and the SRS can roll out a strident "they lost Kosovo" campaign against the government, the party will try to increase its appeal to nationalist-leaning voters from PSS, SPS, and DSS - but not enough to endanger the current government unless it can successfully convince voters that Mladic, Montenegro, and Kosovo results are all damaging to Serbia and its future.

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